The Kids Are Not All Right. A Maryland Bill Aims to Help.

Maryland proposes a somewhat novel concept: mental health days for high school students.

February 24, 2021 By Caroline Tien

Citing research that links the COVID-19 pandemic to a spike in adolescent anxiety and depression, Maryland State Delegate Alonzo T. Washington (D–Prince George's County) is sponsoring legislation that would permit high school students to take at least four mental health days a year sans a doctor's note, according to The Baltimore Sun.

House Bill 461 (HB461) aims to reduce rates of serious mental health issues—and improve academic performance—by enabling students to stay home and "decompress," as Washington put it, from the stress of school once each quarter without fear of academic consequences.

Lockdowns, layoffs, social isolation and COVID-19 paranoia have all exacerbated the pressure some students feel. Seven in 10 teenagers report experiencing anxiety and depression, Washington said, and one in six say they have considered suicide.

On February 3, Washington proclaimed his support for the bill on Twitter.

"I'm proud to sponsor legislation granting students an excused absence for a mental health day," he wrote. "Our students are carrying a lot of weight and trauma and deserve an opportunity to decompress."

If HB461 passes the Maryland General Assembly, Maryland would become the third state (after Utah in 2018 and Oregon in 2019) to officially recognize a mental health crisis as a valid excuse for student absenteeism. Such policy changes have the potential to normalize stigmatized psychological conditions, such as depression, Sharon Hoover, PhD, a professor of child and adolescent psychiatry and codirector of the National Center for School Mental Health at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, told the Sun.

For more on mental health woes caused or exacerbated by the pandemic, read "Feeling Anxiety About the Coronavirus?" and "COVID-19 Worsens Mental Health, Sparks Overdoses." For more on how to help teenagers and young adults struggling with their mental health, read "More Frequent Mental Health Visits May Reduce Suicide by At-Risk Youth."

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